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SUBJECT: IRAQ NOT IN A TIME OF CHOLERA

Reference: 07 BAGHDAD 2899

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Iraq Ministry of Health (MoH) officials said September 9 that there have been a total of 26 cases of cholera reported in 2008; according to health officials, this is far below the number of cases reported by this time last year and falls well short of the threshold of an outbreak. Due to Iraq's poorly designed and maintained water treatment and sewage systems, cholera cases are not unusual, especially during the summer months. Iran is presently experiencing a similar surge in cholera cases. In coordination with the World Health Organization (WHO), the Embassy Health Attache has made several offers of assistance to the MoH, all of which have been declined. Informally, however, the Baghdad Central Public Health Lab has accepted supplies provided by the U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit and the US Centers for Disease Control in Cairo, Egypt shipped via the WHO pouch. End summary.

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IRAQ 2008 CHOLERA CASES FAR BELOW OUTBREAK LEVEL  
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¶2. (SBU) Iraq Ministry of Health (MoH) officials said on September 9 that a total of twenty-six cases of cholera located in six districts across Iraq have been reported thus far in 2008. These include three from Abu Ghraib, Baghdad, one from Amarah, Maysan (the only confirmed fatality), twenty from Hashimiya and Jufr Al-Sakr, Babil, and one from Al Amiryah, Baghdad. Embassy Health Attache and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Officer note that this volume of cases, including the 20 cases in one district alone, falls far short of the threshold of an outbreak. These numbers are also far smaller than the number of cases reported in 2007 (reftel), with ten deaths and over 1,600 cases reported by this time last year, most of which occurred in the Kurdish region.

¶3. (SBU) Due to Iraq's poorly designed and maintained water treatment and sewage systems, cholera bacteria from untreated human waste can easily get into waterways or into groundwater used for drinking water supplies. This leads to pockets of cholera cases. Warm temperatures make it easier for the bacteria to survive in the water system. Cholera is a regional problem, and media reports that Iran is now also reporting numerous cases.

¶4. (SBU) While BBC reports of six cholera related deaths in Babil have not yet been confirmed by the MoH or the Babil PRT, the Babil Provincial Council has declared a state of emergency. Babil PRT comments in a September 9 update that while tents have been set up outside the Hillah and Hashimiyah hospitals in Babil, they have not yet begun treating patients in those tents. These tents have been set up in the past at this time of year as a preemptive measure in case of a cholera outbreak. The Provincial Council has also purchased 2,000 water containers with a large supply of chlorine tablets for water treatment to distribute through a local NGO in the two affected districts. Dr. Osama, Chairman of the Provincial Council's Health Committee, made it clear to the PRT that he does not consider the current situation a cholera epidemic, noting that cholera is endemic in southern Iraq, especially this time of year.

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ASSISTANCE OFFICIALLY DECLINED, BUT SUPPLIES  
ACCEPTED ANYWAY

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15. (SBU) In coordination with the World Health Organization, Embassy Health Attache has made several formal offers of assistance to the MoH, all of which have been declined. Informally, however, the Baghdad Central Public Health Lab accepted assistance from the U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit (NAMRU-3) and the US Centers for Disease Control in Cairo, Egypt, including 200 Cary-Blair sampling tubes, one bottle of Thiosulfate Citrate Bile Salts Sucrose agar powder, 50 API 20E test strips, 100 Oxidase tests, and Antisera for typing O1 Inaba, O1 Ogawa, and O139. These items were shipped to Baghdad last week via the WHO pouch and are used in the testing of samples to determine whether or not cholera bacteria are present.

CROCKER